

# IDEAS

Ideas are the heart of the message. They reflect the purpose, the theme, the primary content, the main point, or the main story line of the piece. When ideas are strong, the writing is rich with detail, original and thoughtful, highly focused and clear, and sub-stantive. In other words, it says something; it doesn't just meander or list ideas randomly. It doesn't bore the reader with trivia, repetition, or unnecessary information.

## 1-Just Beginning

Someone else might have trouble figuring out what I'm trying to say.  
I might not know enough yet about this topic to write.  
My details are vague: "It was fun and stuff."  
I'm still thinking on paper. I'm looking for an idea.  
I'm not sure what my topic is...OR...maybe my topic is too big: "All about Earth."

## 3-On My Way-Ready for Serious Revision

A reader would understand my MAIN idea. I could use more information, though.

Some details are important and interesting: "She always wore non-matching socks."  
Other details are too general or are things everyone already knows: "She was nice." "It was a July day in Arizona. The weather was warm."

My topic is still too big: "Weather" "World Peace" "All About Computers"

I think a reader would still have some important questions: "So-do computers actually think-or not?" "Does global warming affect weather?" What actually caused the hot air balloon to crash?"

## 5-That's It! Focused, Clear, Specific, Concise

My writing brims with details that hold a reader's attention. The main point is very focused and easy to understand.

A reader would learn something reading this.

I showed what was happening ("The wildly spiraling tornado aimed straight for our barn") rather than just telling ("It was scary").

My topic is small and focused: "What to do when a tornado hits."

Interesting tidbits ("You hear a tornado before you see it") keep my readers reading; no one will get bored and doze off reading this.

I included what was important (whether a tornado can really pick up a house) and left out trivia and details not related to my topic (names of hurricanes since 1900).

I could easily answer the question: What is the point of this paper or this story?

### Quick Check for Revision:

- ☐ I chose a small topic I can manage.
- ☐ I have ALL the information I need to write.
- ☐ The main idea/story in my paper is:  
\_\_\_\_\_ (I can fill in the blank!)
- ☐ The details I chose will hold a reader's attention. They are NOT obvious or boring.
- ☐ I left out things that are not that important.
- ☐ I waited 2 days and re-read this. It still seemed clear.
- ☐ I gave this to someone else to read. I answered any important questions he/she had.

# ORGANIZATION

Organization is the internal structure of the piece. Think of it as being like an animal's skeleton, or the framework of a building under construction. Organization holds the whole thing together. That's why it's such an important trait. Many students say it is also one of the hardest traits to master. Maybe so. Isn't it hard sometimes to organize your room? Attic? Garage? Closet? Or to organize your time? A party? A trip? Organizing your writing is much the same. You have to ask, *Where do I begin? What comes next? After that? Which things go together? Which can be left out? How do I tie up the loose ends?*

## 1-Just Beginning

My writing doesn't have real shape or direction yet.  
I'm not sure where to begin or where to go next.  
What goes with what?  
How does my information connect to the main idea?  
Ideas seem jumbled, scrambled. It's just a list of stuff.  
How do I end this? Get me out!

## 3-On My Way-Ready for Serious Revision

It's partly smooth, partly bumpy. I'm *starting* to know where I'm going. You won't feel lost if you pay attention.

I have a beginning, but I'm not sure it's a grabber. Readers-are you there?

Usually, you can see how I got from point to point, but you might need to make some leaps.

Most things are in the right spot. Some things might need to be moved.

I have a conclusion. It might not be as punchy or insightful as I'd like.

## 5-That's It! Clear and Compelling, Easy To Follow

I give my reader a strong sense of direction. The structure of my paper helps make the meaning clear.

My opening gets a reader's attention and gives a clue about what's coming.

Everything seems in order. You won't feel like reshuffling the deck.

I've made the connections so clear you'll see exactly how the details link to the main idea.

The pacing is just right. I sped along when there wasn't much to tell, but slowed down when details and close-ups were needed.

I didn't stop suddenly or drag the paper out. I ended in a good spot-and with a good thought.

## Quick Check for Revision:

- \_\_\_ My opening is strong. It sets up the whole paper.
- \_\_\_ It's clear where I'm headed, but I don't think it's TOO obvious.
- \_\_\_ Things go together. No one will say, "What's THAT doing in this paper?!"
- \_\_\_ The writing build to a main point, or to a most important part.
- \_\_\_ I did NOT start to say one thing, then go off on a tangent.
- \_\_\_ When I had told my reader enough, I stopped writing.
- \_\_\_ My conclusion wraps things up well.

# VOICE

Writing that's alive with voice is engaging, hard to put down; voiceless writing is a chore to read. Voice is the personal imprint of the writer on the page, and so is different with each writer. Edgar Allen Poe does not sound like Ralph Waldo Emerson or Maya Angelou. Roald Dahl does not sound like Erma Bombeck. Carl Sagan does not sound like Dave Barry. Each voice is unique. Voice is part concern for the reader (*Are you getting this? Are you still with me?*) part enthusiasm for the topic, and part personal style. Voice also differs somewhat with purpose and audience. A writer may use one voice in a note to a friend, another in a story to be read aloud to 60 listeners, and another still in a business letter or memo.

## 1-Just Beginning

I don't feel engaged by this topic, so how can I get a reader interested.

If you didn't know, I'm not sure you could tell who wrote this. There isn't that much of me in here.

This writing might be flat, but it feels safe. I'm not taking any risks here.

To tell the truth, this topic bores me. I guess it shows.

I've hidden behind a lot of generalities: "School is important." "We should all get an education." "War is brutal." I've said what millions of others have said. It's not personal or individual.

## 3-On My Way-Ready for Serious Revision

I hear myself in spots. My voice booms through for a moment here and there-then fades to a whisper.

I don't think you'll fall asleep, but it isn't strong enough yet to make you laugh, cry or pound the table.

I feel OK about this topic. I might like it more if I knew more or connected it to my own experience.

Sometimes I'm speaking to the reader. Other times, I don't even think about having a reader.

My writing is right on the edge of being funny, scary, dramatic or strong. I just can't seem to get there.

## 5-That's It! It's Me! Individual, Expressive, Engaging...Hear It?

You could tell this was mine if you knew me. It's personal and unique-like fingerprints.

I have put my personal stamp on this paper.

I'm speaking right to the reader. I picture my reader. I imagine how he/she will feel reading this.

I want the reader to feel what I feel, to see what I see.

Because I'm fascinated by this topic, my reader will be curious and involved, too. It's a journey of discovery for both of us.

The tone (humorous, serious, businesslike, friendly) and style (casual and chatty or formal and professional) are just right for my topic and for my audience.

*"Good writing always has strong and appropriate voice."*

- Donald Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing*

### Quick Check for Revision:

- ☐ I like this topic
- ☐ I am enjoying the writing. I like sharing this story/information.
- ☐ I have a good idea who my audience is. I thought about that audience as I was writing.
- ☐ The tone of the paper is just right-funny, light, serious, businesslike, authoritative, etc.
- ☐ This sounds like me. I read it aloud or had someone read it aloud to me. I hear my own voice in here.
- ☐ I said some things that were original, or I said them in my own, original way.

# WORD CHOICE

Careful writers seldom settle for the first word that comes to mind. They constantly search for the “just right” word or phrase that will help the reader get the point. Take the word *big*. This word seems to convey a definite meaning. But does it? Just think of the many different meanings you could create if you wrote... *Massive, enormous, considerable, numerous, momentous, prominent, conspicuous, or self-important*... each is slightly different. Mark Twain once said that the difference between the right word and the almost right word was the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.

## 1-Just Beginning

I can just picture my reader saying, “What did you mean by this?”

These words are too general and vague to paint pictures: “Something neat happened.” “It was great.” “She was special.” “We had fun.” “We liked to do things and stuff.”

Some of my words are mistaken-oops, I mean *misused*.

I use the same words over and over; it’s just those same words, over and over. They’re words, but they’re the same. And I use them over and over until my paper is over.

## 3-On My Way-Ready For Serious Revision

These words get the general message across. But I don’t see many “quotable moments.” I’m not stretching here.

I’m settling for basic meaning. It’s clear. But it could use imagination, flair, pizzazz.

Did I write to impress? Well, I *may* have engaged in the practice of jargonistic over-inflated expressionism for the purpose of creating an impression. Did it facilitate your engagement-or generate decline in your attention quotient?

Instead of settling for “The sun set” I could have said “The sun sagged into the outstretched arms of the trees.”

Tired clichés are like little anchors in my paper: “Bright and early,” “Quick as a flash.” A few original phrases-“Freeze drying is a sort of mummification of the 90s”-breathe life into the text.

## 5-That’s It! Fresh, Original, Precise. Every Word Counts

I searched. I stretched. I found just the right words and phrases to make my meaning clear.

Look at my energetic verbs: *leaped, raged, tumbled, flailed, quaked, moped, launched, pitched, shrieked, wheedled, nudged.*

Some words or phrases will linger in your memory... “The pond was alive with frogs.” “I went headfirst into murky, shadowy waters.” “Not everything about chocolate covered marshmallows is sweet.”

The words I’ve chosen will help my reader picture what I’m talking about and understand my message.

Not a word is misused. Every word carries its weight.

I’ve considered my reader, and used words that will be appealing, informative, and understandable. You might even learn a new word or two reading this.

No clichés, no redundancy-except for effect. I rejected jargon in favor of language that speaks to readers.

## Quick Check for Revision:

- \_\_\_ This language is clear and easy to understand.
- \_\_\_ It’s also precise (I didn’t say, “They danced poorly” when I meant “They butchered the tango”).
- \_\_\_ I could circle at least three strong verbs if you asked.
- \_\_\_ When I read this through, I get a picture in my mind.
- \_\_\_ I did NOT repeat words unless it was necessary.
- \_\_\_ I tried to make things clear and interesting. I was NOT trying to impress people with my BIG vocabulary.

*“Don’t say dog. Say cocker spaniel. Don’t say house. Say cottage. Or vicarage. Or split-level. Or shack. Avoid general statements filled with lackluster parts of speech. Be concrete wherever you can. It’s not a fighter plane; it’s an F16. ...A mist that “curls” around a boat is more intriguing than one that simply “covers” it. ...A piano that sits in the middle of a room “glowing from a rubdown of cactus oil” is a piano I won’t soon forget.*

*-David L. Carroll, A Manual of Writer’s Tricks*



# SENTENCE FLUENCY

Fluent writing is graceful, varied, rhythmic-almost musical. It's easy to read aloud. Sentences are well built. They *move*. They vary in structure and length. Each seems to flow right out of the one before. Strong sentence fluency is marked by logic, creating phrasing, parallel construction, alliteration, and word order that makes interpretive reading feel simple and natural.

## 1-Just Beginning

This paper is hard to read aloud, even with practice.

As I read, I find myself stopping, going back, rechecking the meaning.

I'm having a hard time telling where one sentence ends and the next begins.

Help! Some of these sentences don't make sense.

All my sentences begin with the same two or three words.

I've got a problem! Either (1) everything is strung together in one endless "sentence," OR (2) many choppy little sentences make for a bump-bump-bumpy ride.

If I read this paper aloud, I'd need to do a lot of oral editing (putting words in, taking words out) to make it clear for a listener.

## 3-On My Way-Ready for Serious Revision

It's pretty easy to read aloud if you take your time, but I wish it sounded smoother in places.

I've noticed something about my sentences. My sentences are all about the same length. Maybe I could combine some. Maybe I could shorten others.

I could use some connecting phrases-*When this happened...Later...Another thing to consider...On the other hand...For example...Nevertheless...However*-to show how ideas are linked.

These sentences are readable and clear, but wordy! I should cut some deadwood.

Here and there, I really like the way I strung words together. It's smooth-easy to read.

## 5-That's It! Smooth, Rhythmic, Easy To Read. It Just Flows Along.

These sentences almost sing. It is very easy to read this paper aloud with lots of inflection (expression).

Some sentences are long and stretchy, some short and snappy.

Sentence beginnings vary and show how ideas connect with phrases like ...*As a matter of fact, Next, On the other hand, Taking a closer look at the evidence, Looking at it from a different perspective, To cite another argument,, In addition, etc.*

Excess baggage has been cut. Every sentence is lean and clean.

### Quick Check for Revision:

- ☐ I read this paper aloud or had someone read it to me. I like how it sounds.
- ☐ As I scan down the page, I see that sentences DO begin in different ways.
- ☐ Some sentences are much longer than others.
- ☐ If I use dialogue, I read all parts aloud to see if they sound natural.
- ☐ My sentences are NOT wordy.

# CONVENTIONS

Almost anything a copy editor would deal with comes under the heading of conventions. This includes spelling, punctuation, grammar and usage, capitalization, and paragraph indentation. It does not include such things as handwriting or neatness. Though appearance is important, it is not the same thing as correctness, so it is important not to assess them together. In a strong paper, the conventions are handled so skillfully, the reader doesn't really need to think of them-any more than you normally think to look for spelling errors in a textbook or newspaper. (You might find some if you look carefully, of course, but they're rare.)

## 1-Just Beginning

My editing is not under control yet. You might need to read once to decode, then again to focus on meaning.

Speling error our commun, evin on simple werdz.

I sometimes, used, "punctuation," where it, wasn't needed and in other place's I forgot to put it in

Or I used the wrong punctuation??

I've got capiTAI lETTERs scattered around, or else I forgot to use them at all.

I haven't got the hang of paragraphs yet. When do you indent again? After each sentence? Each page?

The truth is, I haven't spent much time editing this paper.

## 3-On My Way-Ready For Serious Editing

I took a look. I made corrections. But some bothersome mistakes still need cleaning up before I'm ready to publish.

You won't find BIG GLARING errors-the kind that make it hard to understand what I mean. Little hard-to-spot errors, though? Yes, you'll find sum-uh, make that *some*.

Spelling is correct on most simple words. I may have small errors on harder words. Is it *broccoli* or *broccoli*??

Sentences and most proper nouns begin with capitals.

I used paragraphs. Do they ALL begin in the right spots? I need to check.

Minor problems with grammar or usage could make a careful reader pause now and then. Subjects and verbs agree, but I'm not always sure about *who* and *whom* or *me*, I and myself. And what about *there*, *their* and *they're*? *Two*, *too* and *to*?

My paper is readable, but it's a draft shy of "ready" when it comes to editing.

## 5-That's It! Edited, Polished, Correct. Beautiful!

There are so few errors in this paper, you'll have to hunt for them!

It would be a snap to get this ready to publish.

I have used capitals correctly.

My spelling is accurate; I have checked words I did not know.

Paragraph indentations clearly show where discussion of a new topic begins.

Punctuation is used correctly, making each sentence easy to read and interpret.

Grammar and usage are correct and consistent.

My conventions are as formal as they need to be, given the purpose and audience for this writing.

## Quick Check for Editing:

- ☐ I waited at least two days, then read my paper slowly word for word to check for errors.
- ☐ I read this paper both silently and aloud so I could listen AND look for errors.
- ☐ I used editing tools: dictionary, handbook, spell checker on the computer, etc.
- ☐ I got editing help (from a teacher, parent or friend) if I needed it.
- ☐ I checked from the bottom up for spelling errors (so I couldn't read too fast and miss some).

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